

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Aug 25, 2021

Chickenpox vaccine

The chickenpox vaccine is designed to protect against infection with a virus called varicella zoster, which causes chickenpox.

In many countries, including the UK, the chickenpox vaccine is not part of routine vaccination schedules. But it is often available for people who have a high chance of becoming infected, and of becoming seriously ill.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox in children

Chickenpox is a common infection. It is caused by a virus called **varicella zoster**. The most common symptoms are a **mild fever and a rash**, which usually clear up after a few days.

Most **children** catch chickenpox at a young age with no lasting effects. The illness is usually mild and, after being infected, children are **immune** to the virus. So children who have already had chickenpox don't need a vaccine.

Chickenpox in adults

Although chickenpox is almost always a mild illness in children, it can sometimes be serious, especially for people who catch it as adults. This is why parents are often keen for their children to get chickenpox as young children.

Complications of chickenpox, which are more common in adults, can include **pneumonia** and **meningitis**, which can both be fatal.

Chickenpox can be especially dangerous for **pregnant women** and their unborn babies.

Who needs the chickenpox vaccination?

In many countries, including the UK, chickenpox is not one of the infections that are routinely vaccinated against in children.

But many countries offer the vaccine to:

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- people who have an increased chance of being infected as adults, and
- people of any age who have an increased chance of serious complications if they become infected.

For example, in the UK, the varicella vaccine is offered to:

- healthcare workers who are not already immune, either by being vaccinated or by having had chickenpox
- those likely to come into contact with people who have weakened immune systems (such as their family members). Examples of people with weakened immune systems include those having chemotherapy treatment, and people with HIV or AIDS
- people who work with children, and
- military recruits.

Is there anyone who shouldn't have the vaccine?

You should not have the vaccine if you:

- are allergic to any of its ingredients
- have a weakened immune system
- are taking certain medicines that affect the immune system, or
- are pregnant. The chickenpox vaccine contains small amounts of live chickenpox virus, which is dangerous for pregnant women and their unborn babies.

The vaccine is also not recommended for very young babies.

Is it safe?

The chickenpox vaccine has been used for many years and no major safety concerns have been found. But it can cause side effects in some people. These are usually mild and short term. They include:

- pain and redness where the injection is given (called the injection site)
- a fever, and
- a mild rash.

Very rarely, someone can have a severe allergic reaction (called **anaphylaxis**) to the vaccine. This happens to about one person in every one million who are vaccinated. The staff giving the vaccine will have been trained in how to treat anaphylaxis.

How is the vaccination given?

The vaccine is given as an injection, usually into the upper arm. For the best protection, you need two doses, which are given several weeks apart.

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How well does the vaccine work?

The vaccine seems to work better in younger children than in teenagers and adults. But it still gives immunity to most people who have both doses, and it appears to offer good long-term protection.

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